

"MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY RESPONSE  
TO THE HOLOCAUST"

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE ABRAHAM

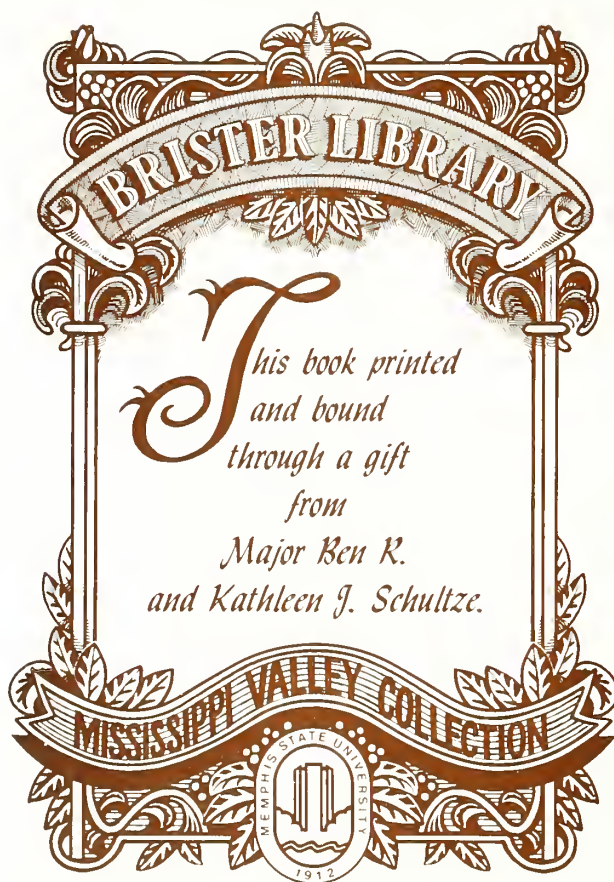
OCTOBER 26, 1989

BY A. MARK LEVIN

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF MEMPHIS AND ITS AWARENESS OF, AND  
RESPONSE TO, THE GROWING CRISIS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN  
GERMANY UNDER HITLER, 1938 - 1939

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE ABRAHAM

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BY A. MARK LEVIN

STUDENT, ORAL HISTORY CLASS, DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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Statement to be Made by The  
Interviewer At The Beginning Of  
Each Interview

**This is Memphis State University Oral History Research Office project:**

"The Memphis Jewish Community and its response to the

growing crisis of the Jewish community in Germany

under Hitler, 1938-1939"

**Date:** Thursday, October 26, 1989

**Interview with (Name):** Mr. George Abraham

475 North Highland

**Address :** Memphis, Tennessee

**Interviewer:** A. Mark Levin





MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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PLACE Memphis, TN.  
DATE Thursday, October 26, 1989

George B. Abraham  
(Interviewee)

A. Mark Levin  
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives  
of the John Willard Brister Library of  
Memphis State University)



THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY CLASS OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "THE MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY AND ITS AWARENESS OF, AND RESPONSE TO, THE GROWING CRISIS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN GERMANY UNDER HITLER, CULMINATING IN KRISTALNACHT (NOVEMBER, 1938) AND THE JOURNEY OF THE ST. LOUIS (MAY/JUNE, 1939)." THE DATE IS THURSDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MR. GEORGE ABRAHAM. THE INTERVIEW IS BY A. MARK LEVIN, A STUDENT IN THE ORAL HISTORY CLASS OF DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY OFFICE. THE INTERVIEW WAS TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY A. MARK LEVIN.

MR. LEVIN: Mr. Abraham, I wonder if we might start with a little bit of your family background. When did your family come to Memphis?

MR. ABRAHAM: My father came to Memphis in 1906. He was living in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He came to this country as a lad about ten or twelve years old, from Austria.

MR. LEVIN: In what year?

MR. ABRAHAM: In about 1888, I think, and I have a biography of that in one of our notes of the family history, and anyway, I was four years old. This was -- I say he came to Memphis in 1910. I was four years old.

MR. LEVIN: So, you were born in 1906?

MR. ABRAHAM: 1906, in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

MR. LEVIN: Where did your mother come from?

MR. ABRAHAM: She also came from Austria/Hungary. Her name was Anna Arnof.





MR. LEVIN: How do you spell Arnof.

MR. ABRAHAM: A-R-N-O-F.

MR. LEVIN: And did she meet your father in this country, or did they meet in Austria?

MR. ABRAHAM: They met in Pennsylvania. I imagine the families knew each other.

MR. LEVIN: So, your parents met in Pennsylvania, married and then moved to Memphis in 1910?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: When you were four years old. What did they do when they came to Memphis?

MR. ABRAHAM: Here, my father had left Scranton in 1910 to go to Oklahoma City during the so-called big "oil rush" that developed in 1910. When he got there, things were so overcrowded, there wasn't a place - a vacant store or a vacant house - so he was returning to Scranton, and the train had a whole day layover in Memphis. My father had recalled that a family named Moskowitz came from the same village that his father came from.

MR. LEVIN: What was that village?

MR. ABRAHAM: I can't recall it. All I know is it's in the Carpathian Mountains of Austria/Hungary, and I never as a young person -- I never did take upon myself. Not so many years ago, I was in Austria/Hungary and tried to find the village by checking the Carpathian Mountains, but the government had changed, and changed the names of the village, and I never was able to find it. Anyway, he had a day





layover and Mr. Moskowitz said he -- whatever his prophecy was, he said, "Sam, you're silly to go back to Scranton. Scranton will never advance as a great town and Memphis is on the verge of growing." How prophetic he was. That day, Memphis had 100,000 population. Scranton was a city of 110,000. Today, Memphis is over 800,000 population, and Scranton has grown 2,000. It has a population of 112,000. So my father came here and he opened a grocery store, and then a month or so later, I came here with my mother and my young sister. About two years later, in the year 1912, my mother was 28 years old, and she died very suddenly, and left my sister, Etta, who was four, and I was six years old. We moved to Scranton to my grandmother's home.

MR. LEVIN: Your father as well?

MR. ABRAHAM: My father stayed here, and they maintained his business. And he had someone take my sister and I back to Scranton. And about a year later, he married a lady named Rosa Weisberger, and we were brought back to Memphis to live with the family. That was in 1913.

MR. LEVIN: Do you remember what elementary school you went to?

MR. ABRAHAM: In Scranton?

MR. LEVIN: Here in Memphis.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I started in St. Paul's School. That was a school in our so-called district, and then when my family moved from a grocery store on Dudley Street to



Melrose, we went to Brew School, where I graduated, and then I went to Central High School, where I graduated in 1924.

MR. LEVIN: After you graduated from high school in 1924, you were then fourteen years old.

MR. ABRAHAM: No, from high school, I was 18 when I graduated from high school.

MR. LEVIN: You were born in 1906. That's correct.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. I was 18.

MR. LEVIN: After you graduated high school --

MR. ABRAHAM: Wait a minute. I was 18 -- yes, that's right.

MR. LEVIN: After you graduated high school, did you go to college?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Where?

MR. ABRAHAM: I went to the University of Chicago in 1924 and 1925, and I was about to go back for my sophomore year, when my father's business had changed dramatically from a wholesale business to manufacturing, and we had expanded going into several of the tri-state areas. So at the very last moment, I decided not to go back to Chicago, and I went to night school at the University of Memphis Law School. And after three years I got my degree and passed the Bar Exam. Was admitted to the Tennessee Bar. But I never practiced law in any way, shape or form.

MR. LEVIN: What year did you graduate from the law school?

MR. ABRAHAM: 1928.

MR. LEVIN: And you were admitted to the bar in 1928?





MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, in June, 1928.

MR. LEVIN: But instead of practicing law, you went into the family business?

MR. ABRAHAM: I stayed in the family business, yes.

MR. LEVIN: In what year did you get married?

MR. ABRAHAM: December 1, 1928, a few months after I passed the Bar Exam. In 1928. We were married December the first.

MR. LEVIN: And, when were you blessed with children?

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, our oldest son, Hubert, was born June 3, 1933. And then eighteen and a half months later, our younger son, Lee, was born, December 17, 1933.

MR. LEVIN: And all those years you lived in Memphis, and you have continued to live in Memphis since then?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, except this -- in 1955, after we had sold our business to Wilson Company, Ceil [Mr. Abraham's wife] and I moved to Chicago, where I was president of Illinois Packing Company, from 1955 to 1961, and then -- that was six years, and then five years I spent with Hi-Grade Food Products, whose headquarters is Detroit, Michigan, and we returned to Memphis in 1966. We were gone a period of eleven years.

MR. LEVIN: But until 1950, you were completely and totally a Memphian?

MR. ABRAHAM: Till 1955.

MR. LEVIN: Till 1955?





MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Do you recall your father's involvement in the Baron Hirsch Congregation?

MR. ABRAHAM Very much so. He --

MR. LEVIN: Is that the Congregation in which you were Bar Mitzvah-ed [celebrated the age of attainment of religious majority -- 13 years for a Jewish boy]?

MR. ABRAHAM Yes. And I went to Sunday School there. My father was a remarkable person. He was a very forceful and effective public speaker for a person who didn't have the broad education that most people we imagined would be able to. Frequently he would ask me, if he had to make an important speech, to write it; and I with my high school and college graduate would be so embarrassed when he would point out evident flaws in my presentation. He had a very acute mind. Brilliant person.

MR. LEVIN: What year did he become President of the Baron Hirsch Synagogue?

MR. ABRAHAM: I can't recall exactly, except I know it was in the early Depression years, and it seems to me like he was President forever. I know it seemed like it was at least six or seven years, from 1930 to probably 1937 or 1938.

MR. LEVIN: Were you active in the Baron Hirsch Synagogue?

MR. ABRAHAM No, except a few years I taught the Junior Congregation.

MR. LEVIN: On Sunday mornings?



MR. ABRAHAM: On Sunday morning. Current Jewish events.

MR. LEVIN: Do you recall what years those were?

MR> ABRAHAM: They were in the 1930's. Seemed to me like  
1932 or 1933 till about 1935 or 1936. Those  
were the early years, of course, when Hitler was sounding off  
in Europe, and in those years nobody in America was paying  
much attention to him.

MR. LEVIN: You mentioned that you were also involved in  
other Jewish organizations as well.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I was President of Sam Schloss Lodge,  
B'nai Brith. I was President of --

MR. LEVIN: What years were you President of that?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think 1937 or 1938, and then I was also Pres-  
ident of the Memphis Zionist District. I think  
that was in the 1940's.

MR. LEVIN: Early 1940's, during the war years?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, during the war years.

MR. LEVIN: It seems to me that you were a person who was  
very interested in what was happening with fel-  
low-Jews throughout the world.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, absolutely. I was well aware of it, in  
particular, having taught current Jewish  
events, and I was also one of the first officers, [I] think I  
was a co-director of the first Jewish Welfare drive in the  
late 1930's, that dramatized and more or less created the era  
of large giving for the Memphis community. And Eric Hirsch  
and I were co-Chairmen of the general funds, fund-giving for



[unintelligible] I gave up -- my father was alive then, and he was so interested that I gave up a whole month -- I brought one of the paid secretaries from the Welfare Fund to my office, and I spent a whole month away from my business to create -- to get this first Jewish Welfare drive on the road, and a successful quota of reaching our goal.

MR. LEVIN: If I might leave your involvement in the Jewish Community briefly. In the 1930's and in the 1920's as well, Mr. Ed Crump, the Mayor of Memphis, was the boss of Memphis.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Did your father have any ties to Crump?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, at one time in the 1930's, through Mr.

Crump the Governor appointed Sam Abraham as a member of the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority], that through the Committee was the one that prompted the TVA Authority. And, of course, in view of that, the Authority became a reality. They even mentioned one of the alleys downtown. They called it November -- I don't know, what is it -- 7, 4.

MR. LEVIN: Seventh.

MR. ABRAHAM: November 7th Street, in honor of the day that TVA was recognized as a reality.

MR. LEVIN: Why did Mr. Crump appoint your father to the governing Board?

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, he recognized him as an astute businessman, and an outstanding civic leader.

MR. LEVIN: Were they friends? Personal friends?





MR. ABRAHAM: Not particularly. They knew each other to speak to each other. Later on, during the war, I became very close to Mr. Crump. It seemed like nearly every time I'd be returning and he couldn't get plane tickets on a train, Mr. and Mrs. Crump would be on the train and we would talk for hours, coming from Washington to Memphis or from Chicago to Memphis.

MR. LEVIN: That was during the war years?

MR. ABRAHAM: The war years, yes. So I became very intimately acquainted with Mr. Crump during that time. That was, of course, after my father passed away.

MR. LEVIN: Can you recall, were there any Jews in the Memphis community who were particularly close to Mr. Crump?

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, of course, the Attorney General, Will Gerber, was very close. In fact, he was probably as close to Mr. Crump as any citizen. He had a lot of authority and he could speak -- in other words, if you wanted Mr. Crump's voice, why, you could get in touch with Will Gerber, and he'd get to Mr. Crump.

MR. LEVIN: Were there any other Jews that may not have had political office, but they supported Mr. Crump through donations to his machine?

MR. ABRAHAM: Of course, I'm sure there were many of them.

But the one that I think of on the spur of the moment since you asked the question is Mr. Ira Lichterman,



who was the head of Southern Leather Company. Ira was a very, very close friend of Mr. Crump. And he --

MR. LEVIN: When you say "close friend," do you mean social friend?

MR. ABRAHAM: No, I wouldn't say social, but I'd say better than acquaintances. In other words, Ira could call Mr. Crump any time and ask him most anything. And, of course, Mr. Crump was a person -- I don't know what you've heard -- who didn't flaunt his power or authority. I can recall once -- I don't recall [the exact issue] but I got a call from some friend in Chicago or Washington about a certain bill that was in the Tennessee Legislature. And they said they knew I was a friend of Mr. Crump. Would I get hold of him and ask him for his influence on the bill. So I called his office and his secretary was a classmate of mine at Central High School, Clara Muller. Said, "George, Mr. Crump is not in town, but when he calls in, I'll give him your message about it," and I didn't hear anything about it. But two days later the bill was killed in Nashville, and it didn't pass. So about a month or so later, I had occasion to see Mr. Crump and wanted to thank him for his assistance. He said "George, I don't know what you're talking about." So that's the way he performed. Anyone that knew Mr. Crump knew that he was a man of great honor, and he ran this city -- and most people didn't understand it -- as a benevolent despot. And no one could ever, ever say that he or his close cohorts did anything on the sly or underhanded or for money. He





enjoyed the power and he did it for that. And of course, if somebody -- without solicitation -- he never solicited insurance business, but a lot of people at DuPont or International Harvester came here --

MR. LEVIN: It was wise for them --

MR. ABRAHAM: It was wise to give insurance business, but he never solicited. In fact, as close as we were with Mr. Crump, it never dawned on us to give him insurance business until later on in our lives. We never dawned -- as close as we were -- to give business. At different stages of our business career, we did have business with his firm.

MR. LEVIN: In my study of Memphis history of the era, I have read a great deal about Mr. Crump, and everybody agrees -- all the biographers agree -- that he was a very honest man, and he was one of the few city bosses who didn't make himself rich at the public trough.

MR. ABRAHAM: That's very true. He enjoyed the power and he didn't need the money. And he was always glad to do something -- a favor -- for anybody if it was honorable and honest.

MR. LEVIN: Do you know what kind of relationship Mr. Crump had with Mr. Roosevelt?

MR. ABRAHAM: No, I don't.

MR. LEVIN: You mentioned Mr. Crump was frequently on the train. Train traveling from Washington to Memphis. What was he in Washington for?

MR. ABRAHAM: I never asked him and he never told me. One of



his habits was, he was a great lover of horse-racing, although he frowned on racing in Memphis for Memphis citizens. I had frequently ran into Mr. Crump in New Orleans and Chicago at the race tracks. And I never will forget one funny incident. In New Orleans at the Sugar Bowl football game, friends of ours were at the track and his box was next to ours, and every race he'd come and reach in his vest pocket, and he said "I got the winner, George," so I followed him one time and found out that he bought a ticket on every horse. Not much -- \$2, \$5 ticket, so that he could show off to the Memphis constituents what a great picker he was.

MR. LEVIN: Mr. Crump was a very strong supporter of President Roosevelt. And in fact he used to get Democratic majorities in Shelby County by voting the black folks a few times.

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, I never -- I never was privy to that information. I can't make any comment on it.

MR. LEVIN: That's documented in that respect. Mr. Gerber was aware of that and knowledgeable about that. But the point is that Mr. Crump did have a good relationship with Mr. Roosevelt, and when he was in Washington on numerous occasions, was entertained in the White House as a guest of the Roosevelts. There was another Tennessee Senator -- Senator McKellar.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I knew him very, very well.

MR. LEVIN: When you say you knew him very well, you sup-



ported his campaign, you spoke to him on the telephone, you met with him? What was your relationship with him?

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, when I became a member of the War Meat Board, it was for about three or four years, I would be in Washington every Tuesday and Wednesday. During that time, I got to be very, very close to Senator McKellar.

MR. LEVIN: He was Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

MR. ABRAHAM: Right.

MR. LEVIN: And in those days, the Chairman wielded a great deal of power?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: He told the Committee what to do.

MR. ABRAHAM: No doubt about it. I'd seen him in action. I've been in his office when pertaining to getting his opinion on a certain bill, and I'd see him get on the phone and talk to the Chairman of the so-called Committee, and just really scream at him to get action. And I had breakfast with Senator McKellar many, many [times]. In any event, he lived at the Mayfair Hotel. He was a bachelor, and when I was in Washington, I frequently, when I had some particular business, would have breakfast with him, and I did that many, many times during my experience in Washington.

MR. LEVIN: Did your father have any relationship with Mr. McKellar? With Senator McKellar?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. Not many, many of them. They knew each





other, spoke to each other, but they weren't what I would call close.

MR. LEVIN: Senator McKellar was closely connected to Crump?

MR. ABRAHAM: No question about it.

MR. LEVIN: In fact, I have been told that Senator McKellar didn't shine his shoes without consulting with Mr. Crump.

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, that may be an exaggerated figure of speech, but Senator McKellar and Mr. Crump were, of course, very, very close all the years that Senator McKellar served in the Senate.

MR. LEVIN: There was another Tennessean who had a very prominent position of power in Washington under Roosevelt's administration, who had been a Tennessee Senator from Nashville, from middle Tennessee, Cordell Hull.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, who later became Secretary of State.

MR. LEVIN: Was Cordell Hull connected to the Crump political organization?

MR. ABRAHAM: I really don't know whether he was or not. I never heard of any connection with it. He could or could not. I haven't the slightest idea.

MR. LEVIN: My understanding is that Mr. Crump controlled not only Shelby County, but Democratic politics in Tennessee.

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, that could be off and on. Later on, in



Middle and East Tennessee -- it's hard for me to believe that he controlled politics in other sections of the State. Seems to me like East Tennessee and Middle Tennessee had a mind of their own, and I just can't -- I don't recall him having influence over the other parts of the state. It's possible, but I can't recall it.

MR. LEVIN: There was a young Jewish attorney, a Memphian, by the name of Abe Fortas.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I knew him well.

MR. LEVIN: Are you a contemporary of his?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. He may have been - I believe he was about my age. He could have been a few years younger. I visited him in his home right after President Roosevelt appointed me on the War Meat Board. Abe asked me to have dinner at his home, and --

MR. LEVIN: As a friend from Memphis?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. As a friend from Memphis. But I knew his sister and his brother. Seemed like his sister was a classmate of mine in one of the schools here in Memphis.

MR. LEVIN: Now, Mr. Fortas was an attorney for Secretary of the Interior [Harold] Ickes.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Did you know about that?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. I recall that.

MR. LEVIN: He [Abe Fortas] worked in Washington at that time.



MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. He was in Washington, and he had several other government appointments, it seems to me, during the early war years. He was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court for a short time, it seemed like.

MR. LEVIN: If we might go back to what you mentioned earlier, that for a number of years, in the 1930s, you had taught Jewish current events at the Junior Congregation of the Baron Hirsch Synagogue, and because of your involvement as President of the Sam Schloss Lodge of B'nai Brith, and as President of the Memphis Zionist District. It seems to me that you had a greater awareness of what was happening to Jews in Europe, and particularly the Jewish Community in Germany than most people. Is that correct?

MR. ABRAHAM: I would say so. Yes. That's correct.

MR. LEVIN: You were aware, for example, in 1935, of the Nuremberg Laws.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Which disenfranchised the German Jews -- took away the vote from them, took away their rights from them. Do you recall, perhaps, teaching your class, your current events class, about that?

MR. ABRAHAM: I definitely do. It seemed like the classes were on Sunday morning, and each Thursday or Friday I would go by The Hebrew Watchman office and Milton or Leo [Goldberger] would give me --

MR. LEVIN: Milton or Leo Goldberger, who were the Editors





of the newspaper?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes. Would hand me the teletypes of all the news which was more than they could print, so I just had a fistful of information, and most of my talks on current events was about Hitler, and I'm sure the students -- the boys and girls in the class -- got an early appreciation or disenchantment of the world news that was going on, and which most people in Memphis -- and I guess throughout the country -- didn't seem to pay particular attention to.

MR. LEVIN: In 1938, in November, 1938, there erupted a giant pogrom of riots throughout Germany by Hitler's semi-official thugs. They burned and broke Synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses, Jewish homes. They rounded up more than fifty thousand Jewish men and took them to internment camps. Those are the events that have become known as "Kristalnacht." Do you recall those events?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I do.

MR. LEVIN: Do you recall the Memphis Jewish Community talking about those events? Worried about those events? Interested in doing something about them?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, there was a huge meeting called through The Commercial Appeal and through the clergy -- had a big meeting at Ellis Auditorium, which I think over 2,500 people attended this particular ceremony on a Sunday.

MR. LEVIN: Do you remember that meeting?

MR. ABRAHAM: I have a faint recollection.

MR. LEVIN: Do you recall perhaps being there?



MR. ABRAHAM: I'm sure I was. Because anything like that would certainly attract me and make me very cognizant of being a part of the ceremony.

MR. LEVIN: There happened in May or June, 1939, a few months later, there was a boat of German Jewish Refugees that sailed to Cuba, and their visas were repudiated. And they were faced with the return to Germany. Do you recall that boat?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yeah, I have a faint recollection of that incident. And I know people were very, very vehement about the fact that they were turned back.

MR. LEVIN: That was the Journey of the St. Louis. The boat's name was the St. Louis.

MR. ABRAHAM: Yeah, uh-huh, now I do recall that.

MR. LEVIN: After Kristalnacht in November, 1938, the single biggest challenge facing the American Jewish Community was to help get German Jews out of Germany, because for the first time, they truly realized what Hitler was, or what he meant to do, and what he intended to do. Do you recall anybody in Memphis at the time saying "Ladies and Gentlemen, we need to contact our Senators, our Congressmen, the President, and urge them to give visas to German Jews?" [Mr. Abraham leaves room to take long-distance telephone call from his son.] Will Gerber?

MR. ABRAHAM: It seems to me that they did and that's why the Jewish Welfare Fund had its first terrific mobilization of raising funds for the -- to help the refugees



and so forth, and the amount of the Welfare Fund was -- the amount raised was a thousand or two thousand percent over any previous drive.

MR. LEVIN: And what was the major use to which these funds were put?

MR. ABRAHAM: To help the so-called refugees and the persecution of the German Jewry and other Jews from other countries that Hitler was persecuting.

MR. LEVIN: Do you know if any Memphis Jews signed papers to assume financial responsibility for German Jewish refugees, either family members or people whom they didn't even know? But undertook responsibility that they wouldn't become charges or dependent upon government assistance?

MR. ABRAHAM: I'm sure there is, but I can't recall the names.

MR. LEVIN: You don't remember?

MR. ABRAHAM: I don't remember the names, but it seems like there was -- I just can't remember, but I seem to recall the incident, but I can't remember who it was.

MR. LEVIN: Why do you think President Roosevelt did not assume leadership in opening the gates of America to large numbers of German Jewish refugees?

MR. ABRAHAM: It's hard to read what's on someone's mind.

MR. LEVIN: We can speculate. What are your feelings?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think the thing that was uppermost in Ameri-





can citizens was, the Depression was on. There were tremendous hundreds, thousands, millions, of American citizens unemployed, on welfare, and the thought of bringing additional people here, whether they were Jews, Catholics, blacks, yellow -- it was just politically unstable -- unsatisfactory to the American people to digest. Now, I think as a politician, that was what he feared and didn't want that against his name or reputation or record.

MR. LEVIN: Does the name Father Coughlin mean anything to you?

MR. ABRAHAM: I recall him being a Catholic leader in the days there, and again, my memory's not good, but I believe he was somewhat anti-Semitic.

MR. LEVIN: He had a weekly radio program, about two and a half million listeners each week, in which he spewed forth virulent anti-Semitism.

MR. ABRAHAM: I recall that now. I recall that, very much so.

MR. LEVIN: Do you recall that anti-Semitism was a factor on President Roosevelt's mind, that there were large numbers of Americans who simply did not want more Jews in America?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think anti-Semitism could have been a factor, but I think that the Depression of so many people hungry, American people hungry, out of work, out of jobs, probably was more uppermost in the minds than anti-Semitism. Now, anti-Semitism could be a factor. It was probably bad,



but I think the Depression was more of a factor than anti-Semitism, about not wanting anyone to come into this country.

MR. LEVIN: In addition to Mr. Gerber, were there any other Jews who could have gone to Mr. Crump, picked up the phone, and said "Mr. Crump, I have to speak to you on a matter of great urgency."?

MR. ABRAHAM: I'm sure my father could have.

MR. LEVIN: And Mr. Gerber.

MR. ABRAHAM: Mr. Gerber.

MR. LEVIN: How about Mr. Newberger?

MR. ABRAHAM: Mr. Newberger, certainly. Arthur Halle probably could.

MR. LEVIN: Mr. Lightman, you mean.

MR. ABRAHAM: Ira Lichterman.

MR. LEVIN: Lichterman.

MR. ABRAHAM: Exactly, Ira Lichterman was very, very close to Mr. Crump.

MR. LEVIN: So they could have gone to Mr. Crump after Kristalnacht, and said, "Mr. Crump, we would appreciate a favor from you, to call President Roosevelt and speak to him about giving visas to German Jews. You see what's happening to them." Could they have done that?

MR. ABRAHAM: They certainly could have.

MR. LEVIN: Could they have called Senator McKellar, who had some influence?

MR. ABRAHAM: Certainly they could have.

MR. LEVIN: Could they have called Cordell Hull, who was a



Tennessean?

MR. ABRAHAM: Probably, but certainly Mr. McKellar and Mr. Crump would have had their ear more than Secretary Hull.

MR. LEVIN: Could they have called Abe Fortas and said, "Abe, we need your help with Secretary of the Interior Ickes, to tell him we need more visas," and he should speak to the President?

MR. ABRAHAM: Certainly, Abe had close ties to Memphis.

MR. LEVIN: Do you know if they did that?

MR. ABRAHAM: I really don't know whether they did or not. I would imagine some of them did, would be my feeling, knowing Mr. Lichterman and Mr. Gerber, that they weren't bashful men. They were honorable men and true to their convictions. And I believe if they were called or asked, and I know they felt that way, I would be surprised if they did not contact Mr. Crump and Mr. McKellar, and probably Mr. Fortas. I have a feeling that they did.

MR. LEVIN: We have no record of that.

MR. ABRAHAM: I just can't believe that Mr. Crump wasn't made aware by Will Gerber, for instance, who was very, very close to him. And I just can't believe that Mr. Crump or Mr. McKellar weren't aware of the situation, because Mr. Gerber was not a bashful person about making his views known to anyone.

MR. LEVIN: In researching the history of the Memphis Jew-





ish Community in 1936-1939, the Jewish Community does not appear to have been very active on behalf of German Jews, even after Kristalnacht, when they read in the newspaper, The Commercial Appeal, for three weeks on the front pages, about the disaster unfolding. If that were to happen today, what do you think the Jewish Community would do?

MR. ABRAHAM: Oh, I think they'd get up in arms and assert themselves.

MR. LEVIN: Why do you think they did not do that in 1938 and 1939?

MR. ABRAHAM: The only thing that I could figure would be they [unintelligible] and whipsawed about depression worries, and knowing that economic rehash of -- I can recall an incident in the 1930's when my father was alive, and I don't recall some gentleman called him and said he overheard a conversation in the locker room of the Memphis Country Club where the man said that Mr. Levy of Levy's Ladies' Ready-to-Wear at Main and Union and Sam Abraham of Abraham Brothers were hiring German or European refugees and letting go the American Jew working for 'em, and they were going to establish a boycott on the two Memphis Jewish firms. My father talked to this Levy about it, said he was going to call this gentleman from the Memphis Country Club and tell him off in very forceful language that what they were saying was true, and they would be doing a very disservice by attempting a boycott to fine Memphis firms. And the man



realized that he was talking off the top of his head and apologized , and nothing happened of the incident.

MR. LEVIN:       Okay, but it was true that your father and Mr. Levy had been hiring European refugees?

MR. ABRAHAM:     No, if they had, there were very few. I can recall in my recollection of the many hundreds of employees of Abraham Brothers only one refugee was hired in the 1930's. He was one gentleman who was hired. It happened to be a legitimate replacement in the labor force.

MR. LEVIN:       If I might change the subject slightly, but I think that you will see the direction that my questions are heading. Memphis in the 1930's was a racially segregated city.

MR. ABRAHAM:     Yes, that's true. As far as blacks were concerned and whites.

MR. LEVIN:       That is correct. Between blacks and whites? How did this racial segregation express itself?

MR. ABRAHAM:     Well, in the old southern tradition, that blacks had separate schools. They rode in the streetcars and different -- in the rear end of it. And they couldn't eat in restaurants. And, they had separate toilet facilities in public buildings -- white and colored. There was complete segregation in what you called white and colored people.

MR. LEVIN:       How do you think the Memphis Jewish Community in the 1930's felt about that? Did they support the racial segregation?



MR. ABRAHAM: I think most of them were -- felt and thought and acted as southerners, not as Jewish people. There may have been a few that spoke out about it, but in the main, I think the whole community was resigned and thought of themselves as the majority of white people. I don't think they thought of that as a Jewish segregational event. In other words, they went along with the crowd.

MR. LEVIN: Even though many of those Jews were themselves immigrants from Europe, where they had experienced discrimination; where there had been quota systems against Jews going to the colleges; where certain clubs and neighborhoods and jobs were closed to Jews. One would have thought that they would have been sympathetic to the blacks -- supportive of getting them rights?

MR. ABRAHAM: That's true, but I think, again, I think the majority of Jews in Memphis felt like most of the Christian or white southerners that went along with the crowd.

MR. LEVIN: Did you recall, either personal experience or know of, discrimination against Jews in Memphis?

MR. ABRAHAM: Let's see. Yes, some, of course, naturally -- like country clubs had a non-admission system. On the other hand, the so-called "dinner club" and civic clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis allowed Jewish members. I belonged to them in the 1930's. I was on the Board of Directors of Rotary the year I left Memphis, and I was on the



Board of Directors of the Memphis Chamber of Commerce. [Turn the tape over at this point.]

MR. LEVIN: Board of the Kiwanis Club?

MR. ABRAHAM: The Rotary Club.

MR. LEVIN: Were you familiar with any quota systems in the professional schools here -- the medical school, the dental school -- ?

MR. ABRAHAM: No, none that I heard of, as far as University of Tennessee medical school.

MR. LEVIN: Were there any residential areas in Memphis where Jews could not live?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think there were one or two places near the Memphis Country Club that didn't allow any Jewish residents. But that was the only area in my recollection of living here practically all of my life, that they had a restriction of residential sections.

MR. LEVIN: In the 1960's, thirty years later, when the Civil Rights Movement erupted and some of the Rabbis here, the late Rabbi [James] Wax, for example; Rabbi [Ari] Becker, the late Rabbi Becker, were active in the Civil Rights Movement, how did the Jewish Community regard that?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think, again, it was a sort of a split opinion. Some people, I'd say the small minority, probably agreed with Rabbi Wax and others of their forceful position. But others resented Jewish -- I've heard of many Jewish people resenting their active participation in the liberal movement.





MR. LEVIN: In your opinion, why was the majority of the Jews resentful of that?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think perhaps they were self-centered, and they feared a backlash.

MR. LEVIN: Against Jews?

MR. ABRAHAM: Against Jews.

MR. LEVIN: Is it possible that in the 1930's, the Memphis Jewish Community was not active on behalf of the German Jewish Community because they also resented the backlash?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, that's certainly true.

MR. LEVIN: When you say "that's certainly true," are you just agreeing with me, or do you feel that the Memphis Jewish Community wanted to keep a very low profile because they were fearful that anti-Semitism could erupt in Memphis just like blacks were discriminated against. Maybe they could do the same to Jews?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes, I think there was a fear of anti-Semitism including a backlash for Jews, and why they weren't active in it. But for some reason, in the early 1930's in particular, and I guess as was brought out in this conversation that in the later 1930's, that the Jewish people didn't get excited enough about what was happening to their fellow-citizens of the earth.

MR. LEVIN: Despite many of your good efforts to educate them about it?

MR. ABRAHAM: Yes.



MR. LEVIN: Why do you think they didn't get excited?

MR. ABRAHAM: Again, I think the Depression, economic feeling. Everybody was scared in the 1930's about their survival and they didn't want a backlash -- an economic backlash or discrimination that would hurt them economically. Their family and friends didn't want to be affected economically by a backlash of treatment.

MR. LEVIN: Mr. Abraham, having spent almost an hour in conversation with you, and I appreciate the time you have given me in going back to that era, is there anything else that you think you might be able to share with me that I haven't touched upon, that might help me understand the Jewish Community in 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, as Hitler was turning the screws on the German Jewish Community. Their plight was very terrible. I'm trying to understand how the Memphis Jewish Community felt about it at that time. Why they felt it. Why they didn't do, or why they did do; what they did do.

MR. ABRAHAM: Well, as late as 1938, when the Memphis Community had its first huge reorganization of what they called the Jewish Welfare Drive, where they attempted to raise about a thousand or two thousand percent more than any other drive, my father insisted that I be on the drive; and I was loaned to the Welfare Fund and gave a whole month away from my business. To contact Memphis Jewry to educate them and the art of giving for the new era, and we drew Dun & Bradstreet reports on people who never gave over \$5 or \$10, to



get them into the notion of giving \$100, \$250, \$500, \$1,000, to people who never contribute -- small merchants, \$5 or \$10, and that year, whatever the goal was, I don't recall, we exceeded it. And I think that was the turning point in the thinking of Memphis Jewry as to awakening to what was happening in Europe. This was 1938, and we were quite proud that Memphis Jewry has taken that to heart since then in their annual giving of the Jewish Welfare or the United Jewish Appeal, whatever we called it. But that was the turning point of Jewish Philanthropy and recognition of what was going on in the world.

MR. LEVIN: Do you remember what year that was in?

MR. ABRAHAM: I think it was 1938. I'm not sure, but I'm pretty reasonably certain. The records could show the first year -- the combined Jewish Appeal went from peanuts to the big-league art of giving.

MR. LEVIN: Mrs. Abraham, you have been sitting here listening to our conversation, understanding the thrust of my questions or what my goal is. Is there anything that you might like to add? {Mrs. Abraham, present during much of the interview, does not wish to go on record, so the tape is turned off.]

MR. LEVIN: Mr. Abraham, I appreciate the time you have shared with me, and I thank you very much, and this will be useful for me in my historical research, and it will be placed in the Brister Library at Memphis State University in the oral history archives there. And in order to





do that, we need for you to sign a release allowing us to do that.

MR. ABRAHAM: It will be my pleasure.

MR. LEVIN: Thank you very much.



